

# Comedy News

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Comedy news and political satire is not something novel or modern, but television and the internet has led to the proliferation of these works in a massive way, which is characteristic of new media's effects on culture. Some think of Shakespeare as the earliest satirist, and satire is known to have played a role in publications around the time of the French Revolution. Comedy news and satire gained a foothold in American culture in the 50s and 60s with wider adoption of television, even though political cartoons and caricatures have existed as long as printed materials have existed in the US. Previously reserved for a segment on *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show*, and its offshoot *The Colbert Report*, became elements of popular culture in the past decade and a half as doses of comedy news four nights out of the week. In the past several months, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* has also grown out of *The Daily Show* as a weekly comedy news program with particularly poignant commentary.

There is no doubt that these works have been successful in the market, as evidenced by their growth, but what are they actually achieving and attempting to achieve? The viewers of these programs have a vested interest in this issue as well as the mainstream news media, since much of comedy news relies on mainstream news being irresponsible, unreliable, or irrelevant. The central question here is, "Does comedy news enhance political and environmental literacy?" Also, does it matter what a given show's goals are, if literacy is increased? These are the issues that must be addressed: "Does comedy news contribute to literacy?", "What role do comedy news writers/figures actually think they are fulfilling?", and "Does it matter what comedy news writers/figures think they are doing?".

*New York Magazine's* Chris Smith writes an extensive 2010 piece profiling Jon Stewart and his program, *The Daily Show*, quite obviously taking the position that Stewart's work helps to *increase* literacy. Interestingly, Smith tries to make this case entirely from the perspective of the writers engineering the show. He shows their journalistic and comedic rigor in breaking down current events and mainstream news media, writing "*Daily Show* staffers monitor every minute of Fox News and hundreds of political shows...writers and researchers assemble in Stewart's office throughout the day, presenting revised scripts for the current show and updating him on the progress of longer-term segments." Here he is subtly building a case that *The Daily Show* informs viewers because it is assembled meticulously. The longer-term segments Smith makes reference to play a vital role as well, since they usually focus on a singular political or societal issue for several minutes. Smith states "His comedy is counterprogramming—postmodern entertainment but with a political purpose", making clear he views Stewart's work as ultimately politically motivated; perhaps not right or left, but political nonetheless. He describes how Stewart's staff laughs at MSNBC's Chuck

Todd, subtly showing how left and right alike are subject to *The Daily Show's* keen eye. Smith quotes respected NBC News anchor Brian Williams: "Jon has chronicled the death of shame in politics and journalism. Many of us on this side of the journalism tracks often wish we were on Jon's side. I envy his platform to shout from the mountaintop. He's a necessary branch of government." Smith is making his case here by adding the voice of someone *in* the mainstream news media, saying Stewart plays a vital role, reinforcing the premise that Stewart knowingly has a part in communicating information to the public, albeit in comedic fashion. Overall, Smith paints a picture of Stewart as a genuine man passionate about his role, stepping up and filling a role as a voice of reason in an increasingly polarized political landscape.

I feel as though Chris Smith's *New York Magazine* piece is an incomplete rendering of the position that posits that comedy news contributes to political literacy. The main points Smith makes is that Stewart is a passionate and honest man, he and his staff are meticulous and rigorous, and that he is respected by the sane voices in the mainstream media. Not too many of these things go to show whether, in the end, literacy is actually increased amongst viewers. Well intentioned as he may be, if literacy isn't elevated, all of Stewart and his team's rigor is wasted. I suppose this comes with the territory of only representing the team that makes the show, and not the segment of the population consuming it. For these reasons I feel Smith paints a pleasant picture of Jon Stewart and his team but ultimately fails to convince anyone of the merits of their program. The one thing he does seem to do effectively is demonstrate how Stewart is motivated by politics and comedy in seemingly equal measures, so he is aware of what he's doing.

Matt Welch, writing for Reason.com in 2011 cites a massive block quote from *Esquire* writer Tom Junod, and adding little subsequent commentary, skewering Jon Stewart. Included in the article are links to a separate Reason.com criticism of Stewart and video shot at an event he and Stephen Colbert held in 2010. In the quote, Junod recounts a segment from *The Daily Show* where Stewart criticized Congress for maltreating 9/11 first responders, and in large part was instrumental in bringing this issue to light and reversing the trajectory of things. He received praise in *The New York Times* and acknowledged that this was out of place, since after all, he is just a comedian. Junod is critical of Stewart's backtracking after making a political statement to double-down on his role as a comedian. Junod doesn't go so far as to invite Stewart to become a true pundit, because he implies that he is not qualified for such a role. He claims that Stewart "to a degree unique in the culture, exists outside the realm of judgment", specifically *because* Stewart only declares himself a comedian. The overall argument of the piece is that Jon Stewart is a

political activist masquerading as a comedian, which gives him carte blanche to be ruthless and rewards him with undue praise if he accomplishes anything.

Linked to in the piece is a video of supporters of Stewart and Colbert being interviewed at one of their rallies. The video is shot and edited in a way to represent this rally as being full of ignorant followers, who are predominantly white. The not so subtle implication of creating this video and linking to it here is that Stewart fails to contribute to an educated population and only fuels cynicism and misinformation.

I found the Reason.com piece to be fairly weak, overall, in its attempts to paint a picture of Stewart as unhelpful or disreputable. The author(s) completely ignore the good that was done by Stewart's advocacy on the part of the 9/11 first responders, and instead express their indignation at him receiving praise for this. Perhaps if the authors demonstrated how the mainstream news tried to shed light on this issue and nothing was accomplished, it would communicate that Stewart receives unwarranted attention and credibility. Instead, one could infer that Stewart stands alone in the media landscape as a voice of reason advocating for those with little to no voice, which runs counter to their arguments. The same goes with the comment towards the end of the piece, criticizing Stewart's own criticism of Jim Cramer's shaky financial advice to consumers, as somehow cruel or unnecessary. The authors might have done well to show that Cramer caught heat from people other than Stewart, but they fail to. Instead they appear to be proving Stewart's point that mainstream media is fixated on non-news while the public thirsts for a reasonable voice and is forced to turn to comedians.

Additionally, the video does little to show the premise to be true, of not contributing to political literacy. All the video proves is that some number of people out of over 100,000 don't know exactly what they are talking about. For all a viewer knows, Reason.com could have edited knowledgeable attendees out of the video, and cherry picked interviews.

A better source for addressing this issue is the Bruce W. Hardy et al. journal in *Mass Communication & Society*, "Stephen Colbert's Civics Lesson: How Colbert Super PAC Taught Viewers About Campaign Finance". The article states "Much of this research suggests that viewers of political comedy programs hold higher levels of political knowledge than non-viewers" (Hardy et al. 331) and goes on to explain that the narrative structure and entertainment value of comedy news keeps viewers more interested and able to learn. They cite research that showed that comedy facilitates learning, and posited this is why comedy news is more effective at teaching certain political issues. The article specifically highlights a recurring

segment on *The Colbert Report* discussing the corruption of campaign finance, wherein Colbert creates a PAC and secret 501(c)(4) with the help of former FEC chairman Trevor Potter.

The process of creating these organizations and the well crafted dialogue won Colbert a peabody award, but Hardy set out to determine whether the segment increased perceived and actual knowledge of campaign finance issues. They show that conclusively, *The Colbert Report* better educated viewers on Super PACs and issues of campaign finance than the mainstream media counterparts. The journal also makes several other important points on this issue, including stating “political comedy can act as a “gateway” to additional news use”, and that “in two experimental studies, Xenos and Becker (2009) found moderate support for the notion that exposure to a political comedy program increases attentiveness to an issue in other media”. This is important because if comedy news is insufficient to educate in and of itself, it would need to be proven to be effective in encouraging viewers to engage with other more potent news media. Another important point is that “Feldman (2013) found that viewers of The Daily Show who think of the show as a mix of news and entertainment learned more than viewers who held a purely entertainment orientation to the show.” This means that is *does* matter what the perceived intentions of the writers are to the viewers in terms of education value. Additionally, the article states “In 2007, the Pew Research Center reported that more than half (54%) of *The Daily Show/The Colbert Report* viewers were highly knowledgeable about public affairs – a percentage that tied with newspaper readers and was higher than any other news outlet (Pew Research Center, 2007).”

My opinion and general experience aligns with the third article I’ve included. I’ve been watching comedy news since I was in 9th grade, and I can say honestly it has shaped my perspective on things. What comedy news provided for me was a critical and humorous lens through which to view mainstream media. It taught me that not all is as it seems, and there is an agenda to everything. It also encouraged me to dive deeper on topics that interested or frustrated me in particular. I think that comedy news can serve to educate people on specific issues, such as the Colbert Super PAC, but more importantly it helps make light of the ineffective mainstream media, and whets the viewers appetite for more, honest journalism. I think that comedy news should carry on, and programs such as *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* are particularly encouraging as they explicitly provide viewers with follow up information. Perhaps *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* could improve on providing additional sources to viewers, but other than that I think they serve an important role in today’s culture.

In conclusion, to address the points raised at the outset, comedy news does enhance political literacy, Jon Stewart and his counterparts are at least partially politically motivated, and based on the data in Hardy's journal, it actually does matter whether viewers feel they are watching purely entertainment versus a comedy news program. I think the temptation for media outlets to attack comedy news writers and figures comes from a place of guilt over their fetishization of conflict and ignorance of what should be actually covered, and these figures in the media would be wise to be more introspective about this issue before attacking these rare voices of sanity.

Bruce W. Hardy – Stephen Colbert's Civics Lesson: How Colbert Super PAC Taught Viewers About Campaign Finance